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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000032

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SUBJECT: SIGNS THAT HAMAS IS LOOKING CONFIDENTLY AT GAZA  
ENDGAMES

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1B. DAMASCUS 10

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly, American Embassy Damascus, Reasons 1  
.4 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: An American-Palestinian academic with regular access to Syrian MFA officials and Hamas leaders in Damascus reports Khalid Mesha'al believes Israel will be unable to sustain its ground operations long enough to inflict a decisive military defeat. He says MFA and Hamas contacts cite heightened concerns about the humanitarian situation, inflamed Arab public opinion, growing Israeli casualties, and mounting international pressure for a ceasefire as factors working in Hamas' favor. The SARG continues to support Hamas demands for a full Israeli military withdrawal, end of the siege, and reopening of border crossings as its central objectives. But Damascus is also susceptible to French and Turkish pressure (septel) to use its influence to moderate Hamas demands. With a push from Syria, Hamas might be willing to make concessions on border crossing control issues. In the meantime, Hamas and the SARG want to see Israel pay a price for launching its Gaza incursion. Diminishing Egypt's influence would also be a positive outcome from Syria's perspective. End Summary

12. (C) American-Palestinian academic Mohammed Muslih (strictly protect), an intermittent Embassy contact whose access and analysis have proven reliable, told us January 8 that his recent discussions with Hamas leaders and Syrian officials suggest a growing confidence that Israel's ground operation will be unable to produce a decisive defeat. The Israeli army will no doubt continue to destroy infrastructure and kill more Hamas militia fighters, they acknowledge. But with some 40,000 fighters who are committed and well armed, Hamas sees it as increasingly unlikely that Israel will be able to sustain the fighting long enough to break Hamas's hold on Gaza. According the Muslih, Mesha'al and other Hamas leaders in Damascus ask how many fighters can Israeli forces kill or capture a day? 50? 60? "Even with those numbers, Hamas can last a lot longer than the international political environment will allow Israel to keep shelling schools," Muslih said, characterizing Hamas and SARG views he had heard in the last two days.

13. (C) Syrian officials also judge time is working against Israel, reports Muslih. Outrage about the humanitarian crisis, inflamed public opinion, mounting Israeli casualties, and growing international pressure for a ceasefire will affect Israel disproportionately, he said. While the Syrian

MFA and security services are under orders to keep Hamas-inspired Palestinian rage from spilling over in Syria, the predominant view among SARG officials and Hamas leaders is that Israel's Gaza incursion has created an opportunity to reduce further the image of Israel's invincibility. "Syria does not want to ruin its chances to resume negotiations on the Golan." At the same time, SARG officials believe their position is popular with the Arab masses and is strengthening Bashar at home, said Muslih. "Bashar is widely seen as a regional player now," Muslih observed.

¶4. (C) Muslih conceded that Syria's relationship with Turkey and France had generated considerable pressure on the SARG to moderate Hamas conditions for a ceasefire. But, he argued, Hamas itself appears flexible enough to allow Syria to be a part of discussions toward a diplomatic solution. "The overriding objective is to still demonstrate that Hamas can improve the lives of the Palestinian population and gain political legitimacy," Muslih suggested. So long as the final agreements allow for ending Israel's siege and opening the borders, Hamas is likely to be flexible on the modalities. "Hamas now is saying privately it is willing to be more flexible on monitoring arrangements that they recognize would impede the flow of arms into Gaza," Muslih claimed. Hamas would still be opposed to an international monitoring presence and it would not be likely to agree on allowing PA control of crossings by the Presidential Guard, but Hamas officials had suggested a willingness to accept the presence of other Fatah security elements, he said.

¶5. (C) Muslih agreed that Hamas and Syria were taking a

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calculated risk by assuming Israel would eventually cave to domestic and international pressure to end the fighting. "Victory for Israel requires re-establishing its deterrent, and that requires inflicting far more damage than it has done so far to Hamas' military wing," Muslih argued. "It could take weeks or months more," he suggested. By contrast, "all Hamas needs is a draw." Hamas wants an end to the siege and open borders, while Israel wants an end to rocket attacks and action to stop arms smuggling. "Hamas has suggested to me that a deal is possible, and that it is looking toward the longer term prospect of supporting peace talks toward a two-state solution," Muslih reported. Muslih predicted that Israel's political horizon was much less clear. "If Israel is trying to weaken Hamas enough to bring back Palestinian Authority control over Gaza, it doesn't understand the first thing about Palestinian politics." The Gaza population would never support such a takeover or view it as legitimate, he said.

¶6. (C) Comment: We continue to hear a variety of assessments regarding Hamas objectives, Hamas-Syrian relations, and their views of potential Gaza endgames. Muslih argues Hamas and Syrian officials are more in sync than others who point to the modifying effect of international pressure on Syria's policy. Unlike Muslih, some observers are reluctant to give Bashar's government credit for having a strategic vision. But there seems to be a growing consensus among our contacts that international conditions will not be conducive to several more weeks of Israeli military operations in Gaza. Ironically, neither Israel nor Hamas want to return to the status quo ante. Muslih makes a reasonable assertion that Hamas recognizes it is fighting for its political life, and that its bar for victory is set lower than Israel's. Hamas, at least its Damascus leadership, may be willing to wait and look for opportunities to inflict military losses against Israel, while (if Muslih's readouts are accurate) it assesses eventual endgame scenarios. Whatever that thinking may ultimately yield, Hamas is content for now to continue "studying" the French/Egyptian ceasefire plan and so far remains non-committal on whether to send someone to Cairo for discussions.

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